

CURRENTS ARTICLE: This article was published in the Fall 2006 issue of Currents, a publication of the Utah State Historic Preservation Office.

## SAVING AN AMERICAN TREASURE

### *Ten archaeological sites in Utah's Canyon Country to be stabilized and protected*

A thousand years can take its toll on any home—particularly one that has been visited by thousands and that was built with sandstone, adobe mortar, and straw.

Homes of Puebloan people that lived in Southwestern Utah beginning in 700 AD, also known as the Anasazi, have started to wear and tear over the years. As a part of the Antiquities Centennial of 1906, the Bureau of Land Management will try to turn back the clock by repairing and stabilizing 10 outstanding archaeological sites in the Grand Gulch, Cedar Mesa, and Comb Ridge area.

Although it's off the beaten path, this rugged country attracts visitors from around the world. The BLM estimates each of these sites is visited by 2,000 to 6,000 people annually (however visitation is difficult to determine because unlike National Parks, there are no entrance gates, just hiking registers).

Some of the first and worst impacts to these sites, came when looters dug at them and stole pottery and other artifacts during the late 1800s (before archaeological sites on the public lands were protected by law). Unfortunately, human impact did not cease after the passage of the Antiquities Act. Now scientists worry these special places are being loved to death. If visited incorrectly, walls can topple when leaned on, rock art can be obscured by campfire smoke damage, and the very few artifacts that remain can disappear in visitors' pockets.

Long-term solutions for preserving these dwellings for the next thousand years will require a mix of managed visitation, public education, monitoring, and law enforcement. However, the first step is to stabilize and document the sites so they are better prepared for visitation. As more people visit these sites, information and directions are posted on unofficial web sites, attracting visitors to areas that are fragile and sensitive.

To assist in this effort, BLM applied for a 'Save America's Treasures' grant. The agency will be given \$225,000 to hire professional archaeologists to document and preserve the sites, if they are able to tap an equal amount of matching funds from other sources. The Utah State Legislature, Native American groups, and local communities have already contributed \$135,000; however, the BLM is still short \$90,000 before it can secure a contractor for the project. If funding is secured, work will begin next year.

"These places not only hold special significance to local communities, but they are also invaluable to all Americans, as they reveal incredible discoveries about the people who inhabited this region thousands of years ago," said Sandra Meyers, Monticello BLM Field Manager. "In all senses, they are an American Treasure."

The multi-year project will also expand understanding about the sites and enhance the opportunities for these areas to be managed for heritage tourism. Detailed documentation of the sites during stabilization will yield new information on how each of the sites was used over time and who inhabited them.

"This is the first time a Save America's Treasures Grant has been awarded for a project in our area. We are so glad that the BLM took the initiative to seek out the funding to protect these special places," said Cleal Bradford, Executive Director for Four Corners Heritage Council. "The public is already visiting these sites, so by solidifying them they will be prepared for this visitation and prevent damage from occurring."

**What the BLM will do to address the threats:** Architectural specialists will visit the sites and assess the condition of each on a room-by-room, wall-by wall basis. Then they will map the site, specifically recording and ranking conditions and threats. Although the general condition of the sites is known, the specific locations of wall failures, damage to sensitive plasters, distribution of wood available for tree-ring dating, etc., are not known. Archaeologists will use this data to determine the best treatments. Scientists prefer to use the least invasive strategies when possible, to preserve the integrity of the site. Silicone drip lines, which are easily reversible, will be installed to divert run off water from impacting the structures. In other places, unstable walls will be repaired with plaster and masonry when necessary. Each site will have a preservation plan with a map and sufficient graphics to execute future work without compromising values. Sites will be placed on a monitoring schedule for periodic revisits and maintenance.

BLM also plans to develop a model for 'virtual' archeological interpretation of the Alkali Ridge National Historic Landmark. Unlike the other nine sites in remote alcoves, the ridge top setting of this site is subject to vehicle damage because many of valuable architectural remnants are predominantly subsurface and not "showy" to the casual visitor. In addition to the digital maps and physical conservation, at this site BLM intends to create a virtual report that will preclude much of the scientific need, or other public need, to visit the site. In the future, some tourists may only visit this treasure via a website.

**How to Help:** Monticello BLM has partnered with the Four Corners Heritage Council and Canyonlands Natural History Association to assist in securing the matching funds for the grant.

Persons interested in contributing matching funds should direct donations to 'Save America's Treasures Project,' Canyonlands Natural History, 3031 South Highway 191 Moab Utah 84532 (phone number: 435-259-6003). For information about the project contact Nancy Shearin, Archaeologist, or Sandra Meyers, Field Office Manager, at the Monticello BLM office (435) 587-1500.



Before and After: Due to deterioration from weathering and visitation, the wall of this ancient publuen structure in was at risk of falling over . The hole at the base of the wall was filled in order to restore the structural integrity.





Archaeologists at Work: A Crew of archaeologists document and stabilize a site in Arch Canyon in San Juan County, Utah. Professional archaeologists will conduct similar improvements to 10 sites in the same general area through the Save America's Treasures project.